



FUR TRADE SOCIETY TO CLASS SOCIETY:

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNIC STRATIFICATION AT FORT CHIPEWYAN, ALBERTA

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Fort Chipewyan is a predominately Native community on the edge of the rich Peace-Athabasca Delta, the heart of the Athabasca country, in northeastern Alberta. *The region was occupied during the 18th and early 19th centuries by Chipewyan and Cree Indians in search of furs, and they displaced the aboriginal inhabitants, the Beaver Indians, westward. *European or "White" fur traders and their employees, some of whom were the forerunners of the distinctive Red River Métis, followed the Indians into the region after Peter Pond's pioneering trading journey to the lower Athabasca River in 1778. *Thus, the expansion of the fur trade into the region led to its occupation by the people who would be its major ethnic actors for the next two centuries. Eventually, there would be at least eight distinct and persistent ethnic groupings: a group of Cree Indians, two groups of Chipewyan Indians, two groups of French Métis, one group of Scots Métis, and both French and British Europeans. This list does not include the large number of ethnic groups represented by the transient White trappers who entered northern Alberta in the 1920s and 1930s, many of whom were immigrants to the prairies from eastern Europe.

The ethnic history is tremendously complex, and I must admit that I had trouble deciding what portion of it would best fit today's forum. I decided to outline the ethnic situation of the contact-traditional era and show how 42 ethnic divisions of the fur trade society began to be transformed into a lower class division of the Canadian class-capitalist society as part of a process which involved the undermining of the fur trade and its replacement by extractive industry, wage labor, and transfer payments as the major source of livelihood in the north.

*The contact-traditional era is the time people mean when they talk about

the "traditional" way of life in the north. * This era has been defined as a "...period of stabilized and regularized fur-trade activities and relationships between Indians and Whites" (Helm, Rogers, and Smith 1981:149). It developed after 1821 as a result of structures imposed by the Hudson Bay Company, and it lasted for over one hundred years, until the end of World War II (cf. McCormack 1981). Its demise marked the formal beginning of the so-called "modern era."

* The most recent discussion about this era asserts that "social and technological change throughout the contact-traditional era was generally incremental and untraumatic" (Helm, Rogers, and Smith in the 1981 Subarctic Handbook:149). This statement suggests an evenness of experiences for Natives and Whites alike that is at odds with the historical record for the Fort Chipewyan region. * Certainly the fur trade dominated the local economy during this era, but the fur trade itself changed greatly during this long period of time. It persisted unhindered only during the period of HBC monopoly, and the end of this monopoly in 1870 led to an expansion of trade and traders in the area. * However, the most significant changes in the trade occurred after the federal and provincial governments and southern entrepreneurs began to expand their activities into the north following World War I. * They were able to do this because the Indians in northern Alberta had signed Treaty 8 in 1899, formally surrendering their aboriginal title to the land, although this land cession was without their knowledge. 20 years later, at the end of World War I, a process to separate the Indians from the land in a real way began in earnest. The land and its fur and game resources were of course, critical to the Indians' fur trade mode of production. The next 30 years, until the end of World War II, marked the loss of Indian control over the land as a result of the imposition of government regulatory regimes, both federal and provincial, which were supportive of the capitalist mode of production and provided for individualized

control of the land to accomodate both extractive industries and White trappers.

* The last 30 years of the contact-traditional era, in other words, ^{represented} ~~were~~ a very traumatic period of underdevelopment and impoverishment for the Native peoples of the Fort Chipewyan region, as well as elsewhere in the north. The "modern era" is rooted in the developments of these three decades.

* The fur trade division of labor entailed three different sorts of positions: there were managers, fur producers, and post and transport workers. For most of the 19th century the managers were Europeans, though in the 20th century through the early 1930s they were Métis. * Fur production was always dominated by Indians, though Métis would often do some trapping in addition to their other duties. The workers who maintained the post and who transported the furs and trade goods were originally both Europeans and Indians, with Europeans employed on a contract basis and Indians on a casual basis. These workers were largely replaced at Fort Chipewyan by the mid-19th century by Red River and Scots Métis. In other words, the different fur trade occupations tended to be allocated along ethnic lines, and in turn one's choice of occupation tended to define one's ethnic affiliation. During the 19th century, it appears that there was considerable openness of ethnic boundaries between the two major ethnic categories of "Indian" and "half-breed" or "Métis," though less so with the European or "White" category. The divisions of the social formation ^{were} ~~appear~~ ~~to have been~~ defined on the bases of culture, occupation, and ethnicity, although a "racial" idiom was used to describe them.

These groupings were divided into two encompassing sectors: those people who lived in the bush with a fur trade mode of production, and those who lived in town as a fur trade and mission labor force. The townspeople were further subdivided into entrepreneurial/managerial and laborer groups.

* Bush peoples comprised Chipewyan and Cree Indians. * By the second quarter of the 19th century, they had entered into new forces of production and new

social relations of production which turned them into trappers, rather than hunters of fur. They supplied the furs and food provisions which the traders needed in considerable amounts and on a regular basis, as well as produced the fur and food for their own consumption (cf. McCormack 1981 for a discussion of this process of transformation). As a result of their virtually identical involvement in the fur trade, Chipewyan and Cree Indians lost most of their earlier cultural distinctiveness; there was even considerable linguistic convergence among the four languages of the region, with Cree becoming the lingua franca. However, they retained their ethnic distinctiveness, which was defined in part by a continued dislike for each other. Each ethnic group was subdivided into a number of localized bands, which were socioterritorial units hunting and trapping in areas which they controlled on what was probably a band basis. Chipewyans were numerically dominant in the region.

Despite the ~~mutual~~ antipathy between Chipewyans and Crees, they began contracting inter-ethnic marriages at least as early as 1858. The total number of primary Chipewyan-Cree marriages from then until the signing of the Treaty in 1899 was eleven, representing 9.8% of all marriages recorded ^{cross-} for those years. By a primary/marriage I mean one between two individuals, each of whom is ethnically homogeneous in ancestry. Of these marriages, most were concentrated in a few Cree families with apparent considerable antiquity in the region. They do not appear to have been marriages made at random, but seem instead to have been designed to create strategic alliances between the numerically weaker Cree and stronger Chipewyan, usually through Cree men marrying Chipewyan women. Such alliances were almost certainly aimed at facilitating peaceful relations and the use of one another's territory, but they did not lead to joint Chipewyan-Cree communities or ethnic convergence at this time. The treaty itself may have resulted in increased ethnic polarization, in that it created a system of two distinct legal bands, each with its own set of chief and headmen. That an increase in polarization may have developed is

suggested by a drop in primary cross-marriages to 3.3% of recorded marriages, at a time when the absolute number of marriages reached an alltime high. ~~In I~~ ^{would describe} ~~other words~~, the ethnic situation for the Indians at this time, when they were still in control of their lives and had adequate resources, ^{as} ~~was~~ analogous to the plural situation discussed by Judith Nagata, in which

Interethnic relations...consist largely of a series of dyadic or polyadic interactions between members of one group and another with but minimal reference to any superordinate, or dominate, or neutral area and with few implications of gradual or eventual social convergence [1974:332].

The town sector was more complex than that of the bush. Robert Lowie, who visited Fort Chipewyan in 1908, described it as "...polyglot and socially many-faceted" (1959:33). Its occupants were divided into three major groups: the most clearly defined ^{consisted of} ~~were~~ the Roman Catholic missionaries, which included the Oblate priests, mostly from France, and the lay brothers and Grey Nuns, mostly from Quebec. A second group consisted of the traders, the NWMP after the turn of the century, and the Anglican missionaries; the Anglican church was considered to be the "English" church. Some of the traders were White, but many of them ^{were} Métis, including the HBC factor by the early 20th century, if not earlier. Finally, there was a large group of Scots and French Métis who formed the labor force of the settlement. They worked for both the missionaries and the traders in a variety of capacities, doing some trapping, but only as one more job, not as the focus of their winter activities. In fact, other than the missionaries, police, and a few traders, virtually the entire population of the settlement was Métis ^{in the early 20th century}.

There were potential conflicts between Métis and Indians arising from the differences in their modes of production and lifestyles: the Métis were oriented to a wage labor economy and were involved in a stratified town social network, while the Indians were oriented to a bush economy and were egalitarian in their social relationships. Nevertheless, they had to interact with one another in trapping and hunting, in wage labor situations, and in town.

Potential conflicts were mediated by a variety of mechanisms: first, the multilingualism prevalent in the area meant that there was relatively easy communication between Métis and Indians. Secondly and most importantly, there were many social links between the Indian and Métis communities, deriving especially from Indian-Métis intermarriage, but also from friendships formed between Métis and Indian men jointly engaged in wage-labor or in hunting. Such friendships were possibly defined as a type of fictive kinship: there are references to men calling one another nistaw, which means brother-in-law in Cree. ^{Thirdly} ~~Finally~~, interaction in town may have been mediated by joint participation in hand-games and dances, bearing in mind Michael Asch's suggestion that a drum dance aims to create a sense of "we-ness" on the part of its diverse participants. ^{Indians & Métis} ~~Finally~~, ^{each playing different roles in the fur trade society} ~~Indians & Métis were complementary,~~

This social configuration changed greatly in the period after World War I as the result of new governmental and entrepreneurial activities in the region. The precipitating event was the invasion of the north by White trappers, many of whom were immigrants who found it difficult to succeed on their prairie homesteads to the south and who were attracted by the high prices paid for furs in the 1920s. They were transients whose goal was to make as much monetary profit as possible and then return south. They accomplished their goal by trapping out the fur-bearers in the areas they invaded, sometimes by using poison. At least some Indians responded to this threatening situation by destroying game habitats: one resident of Fort Chipewyan reported that the Indians would "...often prefer to ruin the trapping ground completely rather than share it" (Rourke n.d.:284), though this strategy only intensified their economic problems. ^{It} It was at this time that a major group of Métis from Lac La Biche, Alberta, moved to Lake Athabasca. ^{While} While they, too, were in competition for furs and game with the Chipewyans in the Athabasca Delta, they were also related to them by at least one affinal tie, and their mode of production was similar to that of the Indians in the bush. They were not transients, and

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+ intermarried with members of the Chipewyan band. they remained in the area. Eventually they were accepted as legitimate occupants and kinsmen by the Indians and other Métis.

4 The increased production of furs and the high prices for which they sold led to the thriving of the fur trade companies at Fort Chipewyan, and the HBC began to modernize its operation in the 1920s. The Indians, however, were dismayed at what was happening to the resources on which they depended, and they began to press the government to honor its treaty commitment to create reserves for them, which they hoped would provide them with some protection from this competition.

The federal government responded to the crisis not by eliminating the White trappers, but by creating Wood Buffalo Park as a sanctuary both for the wood bison, already a protected species, and for the treaty Indians. All Métis and White trappers were forced to leave the park, which was north of the Peace River. As a result, some Métis took treaty at this time, and other Treaty 8 Indians entered the region for the protection which the park afforded them.

The park was extended in 1926 to include the Chipewyan and Cree territories of the Birch River and Peace-Athabasca Delta west of the Athabasca River, both south of the Peace River, over vigorous protest by Indians and Métis alike. The new regulations governing access allowed only those people in the park when it was created to have access to it in the future. In other words, White trappers who were already there were allowed to stay, but Indians who were not in the park area at that time were disallowed access forever, even if they had used the area in the past, as most Indians had, and if they were related to Indians with park privileges, as all were. Apparently all the Crees were in the park in 1926, because they all obtained park privileges. However, this regulation divided the Chipewyan band into two segments, the Delta Chipewyans and the Park Chipewyans, with the Park Chipewyans in by far the better economic situation.

Outside the park, Alberta responded to the distress of the indigenous inhabitants not by evicting White trappers, who were, after all, provincial citizens and voters, but by increasing the regulatory structures within which

These regulatory structures were administered by *white* *conservationists*. all trappers, Indians and Whites alike, had to operate. In other words, conservation measures were introduced through regulation so that in theory, at least, there would be enough fur to accomodate all the trappers in the region. The Indians were seen as the inevitable sufferers in the larger interests of the development of the north, which these White trappers were helping to open and from which they were producing new wealth.

The 1930s continued to be times of increasing regulations and difficulties for the Indians and Métis of the region. The Depression accelerated the development of mining and transportation systems in the north, and it led to a new wave of White trappers. However, it was now only the Indians without park access, the Delta Chipewyans, who bore the brunt of this competition for their resources. They continued to press for the creation of a reserve. Chief Jonas Laviolette sent an urgent letter to Bishop Breynat in 1936, in which he explained that

White trappers steal our trapping grounds. They remove our traps. There is nobody to protect us, and we cannot protect ourselves on our own land against these invaders who become masters of our country [cited in Fumoleau 1975:289].

The certificate of title for the reserve was finally obtained from Alberta in 1937. It appears that the amount of land involved was based on the total Chipewyan band population, even though many of the Chipewyans lived within the park. The reserve size was based on a land allowance designed to provide sufficient land for subsistence farming, not to support a trapping and hunting economy, so the reserve was not large enough to support even those Chipewyans who lived in the Delta, let alone the Chipewyans from the park. It is unlikely that the reserve Chipewyans would have welcomed an influx of additional members. For these and other reasons it seems likely that the park Chipewyans were not active participants in acquiring this reserve, and they neither benefitted from it nor saw it as a homeland. What they wanted, of course, was a reserve in the area of their park. The problem they faced was that the creation of the reserve

had used up the allotment^{of land} provided them by their treaty.

The 1940s lent new urgency to the goal of park Chipewyans and Crees to obtain a reserve of their own. The provincial government introduced registered traplines outside the park, beginning in 1940. Indians who had park access were not considered eligible for these traplines, yet they were in danger of losing their park privileges if they were caught in violation of a park regulation. As well, the park had decided to introduce restricted trapping areas to which the Indians were opposed. In an effort to deal with these threatening developments, the park Chipewyan all transferred to the Cree band in 1944, ~~which was~~ a rather clever strategy which they hoped would strengthen the request by the Crees to obtain a reserve within the park ~~to which they would~~ ~~and be able to have access, to it as well.~~ More than expediency was probably involved, however; the move seems to be a shifting of ethnicity as well, reflecting the different interests and even conflicts which had developed since 1926 between the park and Delta Chipewyans and the new unity of interest between the park Chipewyans and Crees (cf. McCormack 1979).

† Both the 1930s and 1940s were plagued by problems with overtrapping and poor fur and game conditions, with some of these problems caused by government mismanagement, as well as restrictive regulations which the Indians often viewed with bitterness as inappropriate for the local situation and needs. Both Indians and Métis were affected: the Indians, of course, were dependent on the bush resources. But increasingly, so were the Métis, who were squeezed out of their managerial positions and many of their laboring positions by the mid 1930s, as a result of the modernization of the fur trade and the influx of unemployed White southerners. Their sole alternative was to do more fur trapping and hunting for their livelihood, resulting in some cultural convergence with the Indians, even though the resources which would make such a change possible were declining and could not adequately support the people who had traditionally relied on them.

In fact, Indians began to seek wage labor opportunities from the mid 1940s onward, because the land would no longer support them as a result of depletion of species, restrictive regulations, and poor prices for furs. However, the Indians had an option which was not available to the Métis: they could seek and usually obtain some assistance from the Indian Agent. The Agent had become resident in Fort Chipewyan in the 1930s, and as the situation in the bush worsened, people turned to him more and more for assistance. They also sought aid from other agents, especially the missionaries, but also agents who had some useful power, including the power to enforce regulations limiting access to resources. Many of these agents became patrons, each with Native clients who were bound to him. Because Métis were displaced from managerial positions by this time, all patrons were White, and all clients were Native.

It was these vertical relationships between Natives and White agents which reflected, defined, and integrated the social stratification which was more and more coming to characterize the social formation of the Fort Chipewyan social formation in the 1940s, as Natives were forced into positions of dependence rather than retaining their previous autonomy. The regional population was becoming dichotomized into dominant White and subordinate Native sectors, with each sector internally differentiated into groups based on class and ethnicity, respectively. That is, the local social organization characteristic of the earlier fur trade period was, as a direct result of governmental management of trapping and enterprise in the north, beginning to be replaced by a national class structure. It was the creation of a new plural society which would be characterized not by parallel social sectors, but by the vertical stratification of ethnic groups.

In other words, the Natives of the Fort Chipewyan region were already being transformed into a proletariat, prior to the advent of the modern era. Following World War II, this process would become a deliberate goal of the Canadian government, which hoped that the northern Natives would become the

labor force for the new northern industries which it anticipated would spring up all over the north, thus solving the Natives' economic difficulties. The subordinate position of Indians and Métis by the end of the contact-traditional era ensured that they would not be able to participate in this new economy as controllers of resources, other than their own labor-power, and often they would not even be able to sell that. Despite continuous efforts by Native peoples at Fort Chipewyan throughout the 1950s and '60s to regain some control over resources and the institutions affecting them, it was not until the late 1970s and into the 1980s that they would start to see some success in altering this /vertical stratification which had kept them powerless, poor, and dependent for so many years.

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